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A Brezhnev Warning on Neutron Arms

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger's recent announcement that the Reagan administration would "very probably" decide to produce the neutron warhead and deploy it in Western Europe created an international furor.

World leaders had thought the neutron weapon issue was defused for good in April 1978, when Jimmy Carter made the surprising decision to "delay" deployment. At the time, Carter's turnaround was thought to be based largely on West Germany's reluctance to support deployment there.

Another possibility, though, was that Carter backed down on the neutron warhead — which kills people but leaves inanimate objects unscarred and has relatively short-lived radiation effects — because of concern it would cause the Soviets to break off SALT II negotiations.

A secret message to Carter from Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev lends support to the latter theory. A copy of the Brezhnev letter has been obtained by my associate Dale Van Atta. It was sent on Jan. 5, 1978 — three months before Carter's announced decision to put the neutron arm in the deep-freezer.

It is a remarkable document, sharply worded and pointedly addressed to Carter because, as Brezhnev wrote, "it is no secret that the decision whether to start production and deployment of

neutron weapons depends now above all upon the U.S. government, upon you personally, Mr. President."

Noting the matter was one of "significant acuteness," the Kremlin boss said bluntly: "The seriousness of the subject demands that talk be candid."

He said the Soviet Union's position on deployment of the neutron warhead in Western Europe was "sharply negative." The deployment would not be responsive "to the spirit of the times, to the interest of strengthening peace and detente, to peoples' aspirations."

In a typical burst of Kremlin propaganda style, Brezhnev purported to be moved by the terrible potential for destruction posed by the weapon.

"By their nature and their destructive characteristics, neutron weapons can strike not only people wearing military uniforms, but also huge masses of the population," the future attacker of Afghanistan protested. "These are inhuman weapons of mass destruction; they are directed against people. Their appearance will not diminish the likelihood of nuclear conflict but enhance it."

"The reality is that if neutron weapons are ever used, a devastating scythe will sweep across the territories of entire countries, probably not leaving a single inch untouched."

Then the Soviet president issued a not-so-veiled threat: Americans could not expect to escape the "devastating

scythe" simply by being thousands of miles away.

Then Brezhnev got around to SALT II.

"In what light would the negotiations currently underway... appear if simultaneously the deployment of neutron weapons was forced?" he asked. He answered: "Not much would be left of people's trust in solving the problem of disarmament, and in the success of ongoing negotiations. Moreover, the negotiations themselves, at least in some cases, would face the threat of being broken off."

Finally, Brezhnev warned that the United States could not hope to maintain its monopoly on the neutron warhead. He wrote that "if the choice of the United States is in favor of the neutron bomb, this will put the Soviet Union before the necessity to meet the challenge, that is to act in the same way as we were forced to act when atomic weapons came into being."

The letter was signed, "Sincerely, L. Brezhnev." Three months later, after West Germany had reluctantly agreed to deploy the weapon, Carter surprisingly reversed himself and called it off. The SALT II negotiations continued, and a treaty was signed in June 1979.

The Reagan administration has shown no inclination to revive the SALT II talks, and is now proposing to go ahead with the neutron weapon.